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SOMMAIRE	i
-Table des matières	i
-Avis aux auteurs	v
-Notice to contributors	vi
-Préface	vii

LINGUISTIQUE / LINGUISTICS	00
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Etude appréciative de la contextualité dans la traduction de <i>La mort et l'écuyer du roi</i> de Wole Soyinka	01
Damola ADEYEFA Department of European Studies University of Ibadan, Nigéria adevefadamola2@gmail.com	
Les Causes des Interférences Linguistiques et les Problèmes de l'étudiant Yorùbá face à la Traduction	14
M. B. ADEYINKA^o, R. O. GBADAMOSI* and E. M. FABIYI[†] ^o Department of French / Fce Osiele. Abeokuta [*] Department of French / Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo [†] Department of French / Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo	
Aktionsart in Ewe Progressive & Prospective Sentences: A Syntactic-Semantic Study.	22
Ameyo S. AWUKU Maitre de Conférences. Université de Lomé. Togo ameyosa@yahoo.com	
Une Etude Syntaxique des Problèmes de l'appropriation du Subjonctif Présent par les Apprenants de l'University of Benin au Nigéria.	38
Jimoh Junior BRAIMOH^f et Boniface IGBENEGHU*, Ph.D. ^o Department of Foreign Languages University of Benin Benin City Nigeria. jimoh.braimoh@uniben.edu [*] Department of European Languages University of Lagos Akoka, Lagos. Nigeria. boigbeneghu@yahoo.co.uk ; bigbeneghu@unilag.edu.ng	
Linguistic Fundamentals of French and English Languages: A Pedagogical Perspective	53
M.A. OGUNGBOLA and S.A. SALMAN Department of French Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo	

- Bilingualism and Language Domestication in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*** 65
Bertin C. YEHOUEYOU^o and Damlègue LARE^{*}

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 Université d'Abomey-Calavi / yehcoffi@gmail.com
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 Université de Lomé / laredamlegue@gmail.com

- Register Variation in the Translation Process from *L'Enfant Noir* by CamaraLaye to *The African Child*** 79

Akimi YESSOUFOU
 ENS/Porto-Novo
 Université d'Abomey-Calavi
yyeskim@gmail.com

LITTERATURE	/	LITERATURE	95
-------------	---	------------	----

- Une analyse rhétorique du *temps du martyr* de David Diop** 96
Tunde John ADEAGBO Ph. D
 Lecturer, Department of French
 Emmanuel Aiyande College of Education
 Erelu Campus, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria

- Poets and the Mortality Syndrome: An Overview of Dickinson's *I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died* and Soyinka's *Post Mortem*** 107
Oke Fabamise ARULEBA^o and Augustin AINAMON^{*}

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^{*}Professeur Titulaire / Département d'Anglais
 Université d'Abomey – Calavi.

- Léopold Sédar Senghor : du Mythe des Origines à la Gloire Universelle** 120

Babou DIÈNE
 Université Gaston Berger
 Saint-Louis / Sénégal
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- Arrow of God and The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born: An Analysis of the Concept of Power from the Colonial Period to the Post-Colonial Period** 134

Maurice HOUNZANGBE
 Assistant
 English Department
 FLASH / UAC

- Le Défi de Stérilité à Travers *Comme Le Bon Pain* De Mariama Ndoye** 147

Joy I. JOSEPH
 Department of Foreign Languages,
 Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria.
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Cultural Hybridism and the Quest for Identity in Ade Solanke's <i>Pandora's Box: an Afrocentric View</i>	159
Damlègue LARE University of Lome ladgod2006@yahoo.fr	
Characterisation of Fassinou's Main Female Protagonists as Portrayed in <i>Modukpè, le Rêve Brisé</i>	175
Charity Omoleegho OYEWOLE (Mrs) Department of French, School of Languages, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta	
La Démaîtrise dans <i>Le Temps de Tamango et Tamango</i>	187
Gnabana PIDABI Ecole Normale Supérieure Atakpamé / Togo gnabalex2@yahoo.fr	
L'Écriture de Soi dans <i>La Mémoire Amputée</i> de Werewere-Liking	202
Zahui Gondey TOTI AHIDJE Maître-assistant Département de Lettres Modernes / C.M.S. Université Alassane Ouattara Tél : 07004308/55380632 ahidiezahuitoti@yahoo.fr	
HISTOIRE ET CIVILISATION / HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION 213	
Les Espions dans le Royaume du Danxomé	214
Angèle, A. HOUNGNINOU Doctorante en Histoire Laboratoire de Recherche Rétrospective Afrique (LabRA) Département d'Histoire et d'Archéologie Université d'Abomey-Calavi houngninou@yahoo.fr	
Etudes Historiques des Peuplements Djimini et Djamala en Côte D'ivoire	223
Adama KAMARA Assistant Université Alassane Ouattara-Bouaké UR Communication-Milieu et Société Département d'histoire kamara1804@gmail.com	
Les Ecoles confessionnelles islamiques de Bouaké au service de la "Oumma": l'exemple "d'Assakafat al islamiyat" 1972 – 2012	238
Bamba MAMADOU Enseignant-Chercheur Département d'Histoire Université Alassane Ouattara de Bouaké bambagogona@yahoo.fr	

PSYCHOLOGIE -SOCIOLOGIE -PHILOSOPHIE	252
PSYCHOLOGY -SOCIOLOGY -PHILOSOPHY	

Formation des instituteurs à l'Approche par Compétences au Bénin : enjeux et pratiques d'acteurs 253
 Agbodjinou Germain ALLADAKAN
 Département de Sociologie / Anthropologie,
 FLASH / UAC
 agbodjinou1974@yahoo.fr

A Survey of Nigerian Perception of a Meeting Conduct as a Channel of Effective Communication: The Issue at Stake 272
 Innocent A. ARIREMAKO
 Lecturer
 Department of English
 Houdegbe North American University
 Cotonou (Bénin)
 innoprof777@yahoo.com

Stress et Arbitrage au Football : Cas des Arbitres du Championnat de Première Division au Bénin 291
 Antoine ATTIKPA¹, Pascal DAKPO² et Sakariyaou A. WABI³
 1- Psychologie sociale du Sport, Maître-assistant du CAMES
 2- Socio anthropologie du Sport, Maître de Conférences du CAMES
 3-Psychopédagogie du Sport, Maître-assistant du CAMES
 Laboratoire des Sciences de l'Homme et de la Société ; Institut National de la Jeunesse, de l'Education Physique et du Sport (INJEPS)
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Nouveau Programme d'Etude : Le Béninois Nouveau Toujours Incapable de se Prendre en Charge ! 307
 Justin Coomlan AYELO
 Doctorant
 Département de Philosophie
 Université d'Abomey-Calavi

Estime de Soi et Risque de Décrochage chez les Etudiants de l'Université de Lomé (Togo) 323
 Boussanlègue TCHABLE^o et Ibn Habib BAWA^{*}
^o Université de Kara tchable10@gmail.com/ olivivi03@yahoo.fr
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Repenser l'Autorité Éducative dans les Pays Africains en Voie de Démocratisation 341
 Bilakani TONYEME
 Enseignant-chercheur
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 Université de Lomé
 tonyemetheophile@gmail.com
 tonyemetheophile@yahoo.fr

SCIENCE DE L'EDUCATION-DIDACTIQUE DES LANGUES	362
EDUCATION-DIDACTICS	

- Exploring the Use of Participatory Strategies in Developing Environmental Attitudes in Nigerian Children: Implications for EE Teaching and Learning** 363
Josiah O. AJIBOYE and **Sunday. O. AJITONI**
josiah.ajiboye@gmail.com sajitoni2006@yahoo.com
 Department of Teacher Education
 University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
- Motives for Smoking, Expressed Ill-Health Conditions and Alluring Methods of Quitting among Public Tertiary Institution Students in Ijebu Area of Ogun State** 386
T.K. AWESU, Ph.D
 Tai Solarin University of Education
 Ijagun Ogun State
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awesutk@tasued.edu.ng
- Professional Development Obstacles Facing English Language Teachers in selected secondary schools in Oyo, Nigeria** 404
D.O. FAKEYE, Ph.D and **Demilade O. FADELE**
Fako4best@yahoo.com
demmysumbol@gmail.com
 Department of Teacher Education
 University of Ibadan, Nigeria
- Teacher-Related Factors as Correlates of Secondary School Students' Achievement in Economics, Ekiti State, Nigeria** 424
Tolulope V. GBADAMOSI and **Ayobami F. JEGEDE**
samtiv1975@gmail.com
 Department of Teacher Education
 University of Ibadan, Ibadan
- The Teaching of French Language in Nigeria: a Historical Perspective** 438
Araromi Maxwell OLAKUNLE Ph.D
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Exploring the Grotesque in *Life and a Half*

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The Teaching of French Language in Nigeria: a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The significant value of French language in Nigeria is unquantifiable. Nigeria shares frontiers with many Francophone West African countries and she is also a notable member of many international organizations where she played dominant role. Hence, the diplomatic tie between Nigeria and these francophone countries can be further strengthened with the knowledge of French language.

This study however focused attention on the historical analysis of the teaching of French language in Nigeria from the pre-colonial era through the post colonial era with the view to finding a lasting solution to the underdevelopment in the teaching of the language in Nigeria system of education. The incursion of French language into Nigeria system of education dates back to 1878 but not as a core subject. The development in the study of the language did not start until the post colonial era when the need to interact among the independent African states was strongly felt. However, the policy declaration of French language as the second official language in Nigeria in 1997 by General Sanni Abacha, though a welcome development, has not really changed the outlook of the language in Nigeria system of Education. Lack of policy implementation, insensitivity of the government towards the policy and proliferations of languages on the school curriculum constitute obstacles towards the teaching of French language in Nigeria.

It was therefore recommended that government and stakeholders in education should be more alive to their responsibilities in encouraging the teaching and learning of French language across schools in Nigeria.

Keywords: French language, francophone countries, diplomatic ties, system of education, policy declaration

Résumé

L'importance de la langue française au Nigéria est impossible à quantifier. Le Nigéria partage ses frontières avec des pays francophone de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et il est membre de plusieurs organisations internationales où il joue un rôle prédominant. Ainsi, les liens diplomatiques entre le Nigéria et ces pays francophones peuvent se renforcer d'avantage avec la connaissance de la langue française. Cette étude se centre sur l'analyse historique de l'enseignement du français au Nigéria de la période précoloniale à travers l'époque post-coloniale dans le but de trouver une solution durable au sous-développement dans l'enseignement de cette langue dans le système scolaire du Nigéria. L'incursion de la langue française dans le système scolaire nigérian date de 1878, mais pas en tant que matière principale. Le développement dans l'étude de la langue n'a commencé qu'à partir de la période post-coloniale lorsque le besoin de tisser des rapports avec les états indépendants de l'Afrique se faisait sentir. Cependant, la déclaration de la langue française comme deuxième langue officielle au Nigéria en 1997 par le Général Sanni Abacha, malgré les espoirs qu'elle a suscités, n'a pas changé la conception de la langue dans le système scolaire du Nigéria. Le manque d'application de la politique, l'insensibilité du gouvernement envers la politique et la prolifération de langues dans le programme d'enseignement constituent autant d'obstacles dans l'enseignement de la langue française au Nigéria. Aussi est-il recommandé au gouvernement et autres parties prenantes dans l'éducation de prendre conscience de leurs responsabilités en encourageant l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de la langue française dans tous les établissements scolaires du Nigéria.

Mots-clés: langue française, pays francophones, relations diplomatiques, système éducatif, déclaration de politique

Introduction

Between the middle of the nineteenth century and 1960, the entire continent of Africa south of the Sahara experienced colonization with the exception of Ethiopia. Attempt made by Italians to colonize Ethiopia in 1896 was met with frustration in the battle of Adowa but the nation was later invaded by the Italians between 1937 and 1941 which means that it could not be

totally exonerated from colonization (Feuser, 1970). Consequently, foreign languages were imposed on the Africans. French colonies taught French to the children from day one in school, while the German and the English colonies adopted the mother tongue in the education of the children. While English colonial enterprise encouraged massive use of the indigenous languages in the colonies and also in the secondary schools up to the end of the secondary education, the French on the other hand, because of the policy of assimilation, laid much emphasis on the mastery of French language to the detriment of the indigenous languages (Obanya, 1996). While the British tried to adapt the education of the Africans to the culture and traditions of the people, their French counterparts were slow in this process even after the separation of the West and East African French colonies.

1. Overview of History of French teaching in Nigeria

The first contact of the French people with the Africans dated back to the fifteenth century and this contact engendered a ferocious war between the French and the Dutch on the one hand and the Portuguese on the other both of whom they met on the African continent. The war ended with France defeating both countries, (Feuser, 1970). The British also engaged in the same war on their part, which led to France and Britain gaining possession of the West African coast. This continued until the African continent was deliberately partitioned among these European powers in the Conference held in Berlin in 1884 (Feuser, 1970). Since this incident, Africa was made to live with the two major European languages i.e. French and English. French is one of the earliest introduced subjects in the secondary schools in Nigeria. Its teaching started as far back as 1859 (Adelekan, 1983). It was taught as an optional subject in Wesleyan College and Kings College since the establishment of these schools in 1878 and 1909 respectively.

The recommendations of the conference of modern language experts held in Yaoundé and Cotonou in 1961 and 1967 respectively had it that French language should be introduced to the Anglophone African countries and English to the Francophone African countries to facilitate international communication and ties among African states. This gave a new impetus to the learning of French language in Nigeria (Araromi, 1996, Mbuko, 2000). It is therefore stated in the recommendations of the Conference thus:

A second European language should be considered not only as a means of communication between English and French speaking

countries in Africa, but also as an international language with a wide purpose which, jointly with the first European language, would enable Africa to communicate with other countries throughout the World (UNESCO 1981 p,39)

Nigeria embraced the outcome of the Yaoundé Conference to break the communication barriers with her Francophone neighbours especially in the era when the African continent is craving for the creation of United States of Africa and establishment of bilingualism in Africa (Ogike, 2005). French was made one of the world languages of international and diplomatic communication with the creation of OAU now AU on the 26th of May 1963 by thirty-two member countries, having as one of its aims the promotion of international cooperation and diplomatic relations among its members. All the nations of the World under the umbrella of the United Nations and the African nations under AU continued to use French and English as their working languages to propagate African unity and cultural identity (Ukeje, 2005). This assertion is predicated on the United Nations resolutions of 1946 where it was stipulated that all texts and documents of the resolutions should be translated into the two languages viz French and English (Ukeje, 2005). Ukeje however is of the opinion that the impact of foreign languages on politics, international relations, business and education in the West African sub-region cannot be overlooked.

Suffice to say that France, as one of the advanced countries of the world, contributes immensely to the economic development of Nigeria in view of the number of multinational firms such as Elf, Michelin, Total, Peugeot, Berliet Saviem Nigeria limited, the Société Générale Bank, la Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale (CFAO), just to mention a few (Mbuko, 2000). Mbuko further reiterated that the Nigerian Government must pay special attention to commercial, technical and scientific French in order to facilitate the technological and economic development of the country through the medium of the French language. Araromi (1987) noted that the advocacy for the teaching of Science and Technology would be aided by the teaching of functional French to the regular and the professional learners at the elementary level.

However, Obanya (1996) affirmed that the development in the study of the French language in the Anglophone countries started after the attainment of political independence. The urgent need to interact with one another was highly felt especially among the Anglophone West

African countries that share borders with the Francophone West African countries. In the Anglophone countries, the major attempt at teaching French language was at the tertiary level with the famous method termed "Voix et images de la France" (Obanya, 1996).

2. A means for communicating with neighbours

French is indispensable to Nigerians and Nigeria. One of the reasons is that Nigeria is surrounded by some Francophone West African countries and to crown it all, Nigeria is a member of many notable international organizations such as ECOWAS, AU, OPEC, where the Francophone countries constitute the larger percentage of the member states, in which Nigeria plays dominant roles and French is used as a language of communication (Mbuko, 2000). French language is also important in Nigeria because of the cultural value embedded in it. It could bring the rich culture of France and Francophone countries to the doorsteps of Nigerians.

The learning of French language in Nigeria is retarded since the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) promotes the learning of the three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Arabic to the detriment of French language. Ogike (2005) noted that the creation of organizations that promote the learning of indigenous languages thereby portraying those that go against their verdict as unpatriotic relegates the status of French to the background in Nigeria. Some of the advocates of the indigenous languages believe, out of mere cultural or ethnic sentiments, that the teaching and learning of foreign languages make one a stooge or attest to colonization or imperialism in Africa. Moreover, the insensitivity of the foreign governments to the learning of French and the elevation of the sciences above the foreign languages by the present government contribute immensely to the decline in its learning (Araromi, 1987, Ogike, 2005). In the 60's French was only competing with one language with which it was an optional course, but now the National Policy on Education provisions compel a Nigerian child to learn one national language together with his or her mother tongue. The value of French language is now reduced in view of the policy provisions. Specifically the policy states that:

Government appreciates the importance of Language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of National unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian Languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (FGN, 2004)

French on the other hand is considered a non-vocational elective at all levels of the education system even though it is recognized by the policy as a language of international communication and discourse. The status ascribed to the language in the school system is responsible for the decline in the learning of the language in the Nigerian education system (Mbuko, 2000). Viewing the provisions of the National Policy on Education that dwells on language teaching and learning at all levels of education, the breakdown of the language policy provisions will be analyzed as follows:

Considering the role French language plays in the economic development of Nigeria and for pan Africanist reasons and because of the fact that Nigeria is a signatory to the ECOWAS treaty, the Federal government is keen on the teaching of French language as the second official language. Evans (1970) stressed that French is necessary in English speaking West African countries but not for everybody. He maintained that the subject belongs to the upper regions of the secondary school life and the universities. This assertion is controversial because French has now become an indispensable language of international communication. This point can be further elucidated considering the fact that the former Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, was once denied the Office of the Secretary General of the United Nations (U.N) for his lack of knowledge of the French language, a position that was then offered the Egyptian diplomat, Boutros Boutros Ghali.

Nigerian delegates at the international conferences or ECOWAS or UN summits are not able to lobby or read vital or sensitive documents written in French basically in certain fields of human endeavour such as economics, politics and sports because of their inability to speak French. The idea of using interpreters or relying on the translation of sensitive documents should be abolished unless we would be dealing with our neighbors through the third party (Amosu, 2005). It is as a result of this that the late Head of State General Sanni Abacha made a policy declaration in December 1996 that French is to be adopted as the second official language in Nigeria (Ukeje, 2005). In the vision 2010 committee Report (October 1997), it was stated that efforts should be made to expand the teaching of French to cover all levels of education curriculum. In support of this idea, the then Honorable Minister of Education Dauda Birmah inaugurated the task force on the French project on Tuesday February 10, 1998, to promote the

teaching of French both at the Formal and non-formal sectors of the education system (Ukeje, 2005).

In furtherance of the adoption of French as the second official language in Nigeria, the Federal government of Nigeria signed an agreement with the French government on Friday 20th July 2008. This agreement saw the French government doling out the sum of 319.6 million naira for the support of French teaching and learning in the Nigerian system of education. According to the then Minister of Education, similar sum valued at 248 million naira was provided by the French government in 2002 bringing the total sum to 567,760,000 naira committed by the French government to the enhancement of the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria (Saturday Tribune, 21st of June, 2008, Page 9)

3. Underdevelopment in the teaching of foreign languages

In the context of plurality and multiplicity of languages in Nigeria, it could be said that language teaching is an instrument per excellence for national integration and cohesion among diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria. The teaching of language tends towards the enhancement of human productivity and development as stated by Adebayo, (2007). However, the teaching of French language is not devoid of problems and constraints. The problems confronting the teaching of French language are multi-dimensional and multifarious in nature. The rate of poverty and under-development in Nigeria has constituted a stumbling block on the development of the teaching of French language across the schools. The Nigeria government does not accord priority to the teaching of French language in schools despite the fact that language teaching is a huge investment aimed at producing quality human resources needed for productivity and development (Adebayo, 2007).

The field of language education is designed to inculcate communicative ability into the learners which is of vital importance to socio- economic development in Nigeria. The field of language education involves the formal acquisition of communicative skills in the indigenous languages or in the foreign languages. In spite of this laudable and lofty aims and objectives of language education in Nigeria system of education, the implementation of language curriculum especially the foreign language curriculum has suffered tremendous setback in the past few decades. There should be a clear-cut status placed on each language on the school curriculum

and this must be entrenched in the National policy on Education for successful implementation. The position of the National policy on education with respect to the teaching of French language and other languages should be well stated and it should be accompanied with adequate implementation. The provisions of the National Policy on Education revised edition FGN (2004) recognized the multiplicity of language thereby giving room for the proliferation of languages on the school curriculum. This has constituted a major setback to the learning of French as a foreign language. In the National Policy of Education, (FGN, 2004) various terms have been used to qualify the status of different languages in the context of multilingual nature of Nigeria. It would not be strange to find such terms as mother tongue (MT), Nigerian languages (NL), other languages other than the mother tongue, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, official languages (OL) English and French, foreign languages (FL) Arabic, German, Portuguese. To what extent can we categorize French language as an official language in the Nigerian context going by the use of the term "official language" or second official language in Nigeria, what is the level at which French language is used in official setting. Is the language found in key areas in Nigeria such as judiciary, journalism, banking, legislature, Education etc? According to Soyoye (2001), second language's functions include "all communications in the general administration of the country, business, legal procedures, print and electronic media, education and politics". English language is the only language that practically qualifies as a second language. Therefore, to refer to French language as the second official language in Nigeria amounts to making a fallacious statement. The government must not be skeptical to execute the implementation of the policy declaring French language as second official language in Nigeria. Some experts are of the opinion that for the language to take its rightful position in the Nigerian education system, government must be ready to support the policy implementation financially and religiously. The teaching of French language should not be limited or confined to the normal school system but it could be extended to the media. Thus, the teaching and learning of the language now features on television and radio programmes in the country for example "parlons français" on Gateway television on Thursdays. Mass media participation in teaching and learning of French will also help in no small measure to propagate the knowledge of French among the Nigerian populace. As part of efforts in implementing the teaching of French language as the second official language in Nigeria, the media houses have a vital role to play by featuring regular programmes on the

television and radio that dwell on the teaching and learning of French language to a wide population of Nigerian citizens. This will create an opportunity for those who have no contact with French language in the school to have the glimpse of the language in the comfort of their homes. Comparing the present state of French language teaching in the country and its output, it could be affirmed that not much progress has been made. The Rivers state government took the bull by the horn by putting in place programmes that will promote the study of French language and creative arts in its primary and secondary schools. The French training is meant to expose the learners to the study of French for the purpose of inculcating in them the rudiments of French language in a conducive environment equipped with adequate facilities. The rationale behind promoting the learning of French language in Rivers state cannot be divorced from the fact that Rivers state has more French companies than any other states in Nigeria. This programme intends to make the Rivers state people understand French language before they can properly fit into these French multinational companies. The opportunity of working with these multinational companies can also be extended to other states of the federation if foreign language learning programme can be put in place to expose the generality of the Nigerian citizenry to the study of French language.

The language situation in Nigeria is not different from what obtains in Ghana because of common colonial experience. Ghana is also a multilingual and multi ethnic nation. In spite of diverse ethnic groups and plurality of languages, French is required in primary schools in Ghana. In fact 10% of Ghanaian speak the language fluently and the country is an associate member of "la Francophonie". Recently, the government of Ghana required its government officials and military personnels to be fluent in French language. Taking a comparative view of foreign language learning policy in both Ghana and Nigeria, one could discern a clear-cut different foreign language implementation process. Despite the similarity in their colonial experience, what percentage of Nigerians speaks French language fluently? Nigeria only pays a lip service to the implementation of French as second official language since its declaration in 1996. There are other African countries that have also toed the same line of action in its foreign language policy implementation. Equatorial Guinea in 1997 declared French as their official language along with Spanish. The small Island of Cape verde and Sao tome and Principe are also members of "La Francophonie". As a result of this, French has become widely popular in these countries.

Nigeria is yet to be admitted as a member of "La Francophonie" because of her slow pace in developing the teaching and the learning of French language. The case of Sierra Leone and Liberia is also worthy of mention because these countries are English speaking countries. French language is fast making in- road into Sierra Leone while French will be equal with English in the future in Liberia.

Ghanaian armed forces are considering setting aside the first Friday of every month as a 'French day' on which all military officers will speak French. The Geographical location of Ghana in West African sub-region is not quite different from that of Nigeria. Ghana is also surrounded by French speaking countries. It is therefore expedient for personnels of Ghanaian armed forces to take to the learning and speaking of French language. This is a welcome development because of the diplomatic tie between Ghana and her Francophone neighbors. The military personnels should be able to speak both English and French fluently for security reason because the major operation of the armed forces is to protect the country from external aggressions. If the knowledge of foreign language is lacking in the armed forces in both Nigeria and Ghana alike these countries will be under serious security threat and the entire citizenry run the risk of living in perpetual fear. Ghanaian armed forces has fully-functioning French language centers in the 2 and 5 Garrisons in which all efforts are made to replicate them in the remaining garrisons. The government in Ghana is undaunted on its move to make French a common language for as many Ghanaians as possible to enhance economic, commercial and social activities between Ghana and the neighboring countries. Nigeria needs to borrow a leaf from Ghanaian foreign language policy. Nigeria only acknowledges the use and learning of English language because of her colonial experience through the British colonial rule. The learning of French language is insignificant to every Nigerian. In Nigeria, French is always rivaled by English language as the international language of trade, diplomacy and science. Bimbo Fisayo, an educationist while granting interview to Daily champion African News (2008) lay particular emphasis on the importance of speaking and understanding a second international language, especially the French language.

4. Nigerian Education System and French Teaching

The status of French language in Nigeria is questionable and controversial considering the wide gap between policy statement and policy implementation of the laudable idea of making French language the second official language in Nigeria. Professor Evans, the first professor of French in Nigeria dealt a terrible blow on the status of French in Nigeria in his provocative and insightful article "Does everybody need French"? published in 1972. The claim of this revered erudite scholar in the field of French language in Nigeria is genuine and veracious judging by the deficient motivational and learning environment coupled with inadequacies in the physical and material resources meant for the teaching and learning of French language (Ade Ojo, 2006).

Nigeria as the most populated black nation of the world has been identified as the least advanced of all the West African countries in terms of the development in the teaching of French language. Nigeria is densely populated, intellectually and materially endowed but it is quite unfortunate that the implementation of French language as the second official language still suffers tremendous setback most especially when the country is striving to be one of the twenty most developed nations in 2020. The declaration of French language as the second official language by General Sanni Abacha in 1996 has been characterized by an attempt by the then military head of state to pursue a selfish goal and personal agenda. The declaration came at the time when the country (Nigeria) suffered stiff diplomatic penalty. The image of the country at the international community was soiled through the dictatorial and inhuman tendency of the then military government in power which made Nigeria unpopular at the international scene. The declaration of French as the second official language was an attempt to redeem the image of Nigeria at the international community and geared towards winning the support of the francophone community that sees French language as a common heritage. Ade-Ojo (2006) states that irrespective of the criticism meted out to the position of Abacha in making French the second official language in Nigeria, the decision is a welcome development and it is a pointer to the fact that French has come to stay and it is a language that will serve as an instrument of unity and a tool for global partnership among nations of the world. He further states that French language is considered a blessing to Nigeria and Nigerians in general. The blessings inherent in the language should not be limited to a restricted section of the Nigeria population, it must be all

encompassing. However, it could be inferred from the earlier discussion that French is needed by the entire Nigeria citizenry for global and international alignment and communication.

Emordi (1986) recommends the teaching of only the oral aspect of the language. The researcher went further to identify major constraints and problems of French language teaching and learning in the Nigeria system of Education. These problems include among others lack of qualified teachers and teaching materials for effective teaching of the language. These problems constitute a major setback to the development of the teaching and learning of French language in schools.

Asobele (2004) on the other hand states that for French to succeed in Nigeria, it must be taught as a language of culture. It behooves therefore on parents to allow their wards to learn French language because it will open doors of opportunities to them. Nigerians will be able to attend meetings, conferences and seminars organized in French language.

Osun state government also took a giant step similar to that of the River State government while it made the teaching and learning of French language compulsory for students from primary four to Junior Secondary three (JSS III) in all schools in the state (Kolawole, 2010). Osun state government's position in making French compulsory in all the schools in the state is not as a result of the presence of multi-national companies in the state neither is it anchored on the fact that Osun state is surrounded by some francophone countries in West Africa. The value and the importance of French language is worthy of note by the Osun state government. Other states of the federation are still reluctant to make French compulsory at every stage of the education system. Francophone African countries are pursuing rigorous foreign language policy which incorporates the knowledge of English and French and other foreign languages such as Spanish and Portuguese. Francophone countries have been striving to catch up and meet up with English (Sometimes about to surpass the Anglophones), Nigerians continue to make beautiful and viable pronouncements that end up in the archives and libraries. The teaching and learning of French language should go beyond the primary and the secondary levels of our education system. Even at the Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and the universities, efforts should be made to enhance the teaching of French language and it should be taught in specialized institutions like the defense academy, Nigerian war college, Nigerian institute for strategic studies, law school, Nigeria institute of international affairs, Nigerian institute of

journalism, Nigerian institute of tropical Agriculture, voice of Nigeria (international services). Introducing French into these specialized institutions will cater for the inadequacy inherent in the teaching of the language in the normal school system. A cross section of professionals and specialists will be able to attain proficiency in the language in their specialized field of study.

Omari (1985) made a suicidal suggestion in favour of the indigenous language which was detrimental to the teaching and learning of French language. His suggestion delves on total indigenization and integration of the diverse ethnic groups. Omari (1985) states that English and French are imperialist and colonial languages which must be abandoned if we want to engage ourselves in the emancipation process. To write in these languages is to support the imperialists and colonialists in their exploitation of the masses.

This powerful and thought provoking statement made by Omari will further alienate Nigerians from learning colonial languages i.e. English and French because of fear of losing one's cultural identity. However, contrary to this assertion or beliefs, the knowledge of foreign language will expose Nigerians to the history, culture and civilization of the colonial masters.

Conclusion

The historical background to the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria has been critically examined in this paper. It has been established that much attention has not been paid to the teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria system of education due to poor policy implementation, lack of political will and non-challant attitude of the government towards implementing the policy declaring French language as a second official language in Nigeria. There is urgent need for the government to be proactive in implementing the foreign language policy in Nigeria for socio-economic development and sustainability.

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